

U. S. ATTORNEY/NOAA PRESS CONFERENCE

MUTILATED SEAL UPDATE

Friday, January 16, 2004 - 10:00 A.M.
U.S. Coast Guard Station Portsmouth Harbor
New Castle, New Hampshire

Thomas Colantuono:

Good morning and thank you all for coming. My name is Tom Colantuono, United States Attorney for the District of New Hampshire and before we begin the formal part of the conference I'd like to introduce all of the guests and dignitaries and officials who are here today and I would also want to thank the Coast Guard for allowing us to use their facilities and hosting this conference. So from the U.S. Coast Guard we have Captain Mark Landry from the First District in Boston, Lt. Commander Bob McKenna from Portland and Chief Lindsey, the Station Officer in charge of this facility. Thank you very much Chief Lindsey for letting us come here again. We also have from NOAA National Marine Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement the Deputy Special Agent in Charge Andrew Cohen behind me to my left, and Special Agents Anthony Forestiere, Patrick Flynn, Daniel D'Ambrouso, Chris Schoppmeyer and Special Agent Joseph Green. From New Hampshire Fish and Game we have Sergeant Jeff Marston and we also have Commissioners Doug Ross and Glen Normandeau. From New Hampshire Marine Patrol we have Sergeant Eric Robertson and Officer Scott McClain. From Maine Marine Patrol we have Sergeant Paul Joyce and from Massachusetts Environmental Police we have Dean Belanger. I also would like to recognize and welcome from the Executive Council District Three here in New Hampshire Executive Councilor Ruth Griffin from Portsmouth. Thank you for coming, my old friend and colleague.

On July 10 of 2003 this seal, to my right, was found off the waters of Hampton Beach. It had been skinned and was left in that condition. On August 9th that seal to the far right there, was also found off the waters of Hampton Beach. Again it had been skinned and mutilated. The discovery of this seal started an investigation by NOAA, National Marine Fisheries Office for Law Enforcement, Special Agent for this area, Chris Schoppmeyer, who has been leading this case together with the agencies that are here behind us, working together. Because that type of activity is a violation of the Marine Mammal Protection of 1972, it is something that we take very seriously here in the District of New Hampshire. We have had a close working relationship between our office, the U.S. Attorney's, and NOAA National Marine Fisheries, Office for Law Enforcement for many years and have enjoyed working together in solving cases involving resource protection and environmental issues for many years. So, we are working on this case diligently. This case has been investigated since then. It has received some public attention already and since that time members of the public have come forward with helpful information but we have not yet been able to solve this crime and so today we are asking for additional assistance from the public so that we can solve this crime. This type of crime is punishable by up to a year in jail and up to a \$20,000 fine. We have also had information brought forward about additionally, possibly related seal deaths in this area. So we do need the public's assistance. We are asking for the public's assistance and to that end through the efforts of the Office of Law Enforcement and Special Agent Chris Schoppmeyer, a reward fund has been established through the assistance of several area individuals, agencies, businesses and so forth and Special Agent Schoppmeyer will be

announcing that reward fund in just a minute here and will explain how much has been contributed to the fund, what the fund is and how that will work. And so I'd like to introduce Special Agent Chris Schoppmeyer.

Special Agent Chris Schoppmeyer:

Thank you sir. What I'd like to do is just give you a brief update at where we're at. This investigation has been ongoing now for about three and a half to four months. For the sake of the integrity of the investigation we are only going to report that we have two prime suspects and that the suspects are from New Hampshire. Other than that we will not entertain any details at all, any questions concerning the investigation just because of the nature of the investigation. Right now the reward fund stands at \$7,850 and I would like to thank all of those organizations that have come forward and contributed to the reward. With us here today is Peter Whalen and Ritchie White from the New Hampshire Coastal Conservation Association. They started the reward fund back when this case first went public and got the reward fund going. The reward fund, again has been a combination of all these private contributors and also with us here today we have the CEO of Smuttynose Brewery, Mr. Pete Engelston. We also have with us, representing Margarita's Restaurant here in the Seacoast, Paul Timmons, he's here and Joanne Borbeau is here from the Human Society USA. We also had contributions from Joe Tucker construction Company, Dave Dawley Construction Company and also from the Gaslight Restaurant. The Gaslight and Mr. Tucker couldn't be here today. What we will

do is at the end of this press conference we will allow, we'll have the media, so you can ask questions of the contributors and be happy to entertain, you know um, how they got involved and again we just want to thank them all for their help. At this point we will entertain a few questions from the media concerning the investigation. Yes sir.

Reporter:

Roger Woods of Clear Channel Radio here. There seems to be a little bit of a conflict, in my mind anyway, with the U.S. Attorney saying you haven't been able to solve this case when you are saying you have two prime subjects. And I know you said you don't want to go further into the investigation, but have you resolved that in a sense, I mean prime suspects versus not solving the case?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Well, the case remains unsolved, so it really is, there is not really a difference there.

What we are saying is that we have prime suspects but that doesn't mean the suspects did it. But we do have prime suspects and the case does remain unsolved at this time.

Reporter:

What led you to these subjects. Can you say?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

It was a combination of things, law enforcement intelligence and in working with the agencies behind me. We have worked collectively together, trying to resolve this case.

Everybody who stands here has been significantly involved in this case and will continue to be. We're going to work diligently to resolve this crime.

Reporter:

How many of the seal deaths are we talking about and do you believe these two suspects are involved in these as well?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

I cannot say at this time. We can confirm one other seal was found dead of a suspicious nature. This recently happened about a week ago. And that seal, the only thing I will tell you is, it was discovered by a veterinarian, who obviously knew what they were looking at and the seal had been skinned.

Reporter:

So that brings the number to what?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Excuse me?

Reporter:

That brings the total number to what?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

That would bring it to three.

Reporter:

Would there possibly be more cases? You're saying there are three that are confirmed?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

The public has been very, very helpful in this case. We have received well over a hundred calls that have come in. Many of those are strandings but many of those are also actual information that is given to us concerning the investigation. But of those strandings a lot of times those are multiple reports of the same animal, there is absolutely no suspicious nature to the deaths of those animals but we look into every single one of those. As you know in the past several months there were a number of seals that were believed to have been involved, but those have been ruled out. We have been using the services of the New England Aquarium and their Animal Rehabilitation and Care Unit to necropsy any suspicious animals. To date, two of those have been confirmed and those are the two in the pictures you see here.

Reporter:

The one that was found last week was found where?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

It was found directly across from us here in Kittery, Maine.

Reporter:

And the third one was found in this area too?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Yes.

Reporter:

Can you say whether the evidence you are looking for currently, consistently with what you are looking for from the public, would be used to bolster either the case against your two prime suspects, lead to new suspects if incriminating enough, or completely other suspects?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

We will take any information we can at this point whether it leads to the suspects we are looking at or leads in a totally different direction.

Reporter:

How much money is involved here? I mean, if these body parts are being sold overseas, what type of market value, can you give us an estimation?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

It depends, if we're looking at the raw products, say the genitalia, in the raw form is worth several hundred dollars. Once it is brought overseas and it is mixed with other

animal parts it's worth thousands of dollars at that point. It's mixed with black bear gall bladders, reindeer horn, a number of different animal parts and they're made into pills and if you look into the fraction that comes from these animals it becomes very, very lucrative.

Reporter:

Are there other cases that are suspicious but not yet confirmed?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

No, not at this time.

Reporter:

There's only these three?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Right, and then the other issue we have is the skins, and we, there is no market for the skins because obviously they're contraband but the skins themselves, we suspect they are being used for personal use.

Reporter:

Can you say if there is a suspicion that these seals were either gotten off rocks or taken in the open sea or(Inaudible)

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Well, considering the biology of the animal, the animal is a mammal that has to breath air and it can't keep that far from an area that it can haul out and rest. It could be anywhere that this could have happened. It has to be in close proximity to an area where a seal can rest. Where you would find a seal in that area.

Reporter:

Do your two prime suspects know they're prime suspects?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

I don't believe so, no.

Reporter:

So you haven't questioned them yet?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

No.

Reporter:

Are there any other case like this in the District?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

We've had cases that involve seals certainly in this region, in the Northeast Region and to

the best of my knowledge this is the most recent one, but we have other ongoing cases where there are other animals being washed up of a suspicious nature.

Reporter:

Question inaudible.

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Excuse me?

Reporter:

Question inaudible.

Chris Schoppmeyer:

No.

Reporter:

Is it easy for the perpetrator to market the skins?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

There's quite a black market for this. What happens is that any of the animal's parts usually get passed through two or three, let's say stages before they wind up going overseas. There are obvious connections here in the United States; markets in New York, San Francisco, Miami places like that.

Reporter:

Question inaudible.

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Yes. In fact cases like this I work with an agent out of our Southwest Region who recently had a sea lion that was killed with a crossbow and through a reward fund similar to this and our agency acquired information that resulted in the arrest and apprehension, prosecution, and conviction through the criminal courts down in that respective District and that case was just recently has been adjudicated.

Reporter:

Question inaudible.

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Excuse me?

Reporter:

Question in audible.

Chris Schoppmeyer:

I'm not quite sure what the...\$5000.

Reporter:

Question inaudible.

Chris Schoppmeyer:

Yes.

Reporter:

I'm sorry did you say the reward fund was at five grand?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

\$7,850. Ok, we'd like to thank you for coming and have a nice day.

Reporter:

One more thing. These pictures here, can you say which is which for us?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

This first seal over here on the right is the one that had washed up in July of this past summer at Hampton Beach and the one to the left actually was recovered by the New Hampshire Marine Patrol in August and I believe it was recovered right around Hampton Beach.

Reporter:

Is it possible to give us a hint as to how close you are to closing this case?

Chris Schoppmeyer:

No, not at this time. Thank you.